FAQs

ABOUT METACOGNITIVE & METAPHORICAL MUSINGS (M&Ms)

**The mere process of writing is one of the most powerful tools we have for clarifying our own thinking. ~James Van Allen, physicist**

**Writing** lets you “think out loud” on paper and allows us to “see” what you’re thinking about what you’re learning in class. Research has shown that the regular habit of writing can deepen your thinking about a subject by helping you see that the subject is an arena for wonder, inquiry, and controversy rather than simply a new body of information.

1. What is my M&Ms notebook? Your M&Ms notebook is your place to write down thoughts, ideas, plans, questions, answers, stories, and anything else you can think of **that pertains to American Studies**; to experiment, try different things, “play” with writing, without worrying about things like form, grammar, spelling, etc. Make sure to **PUT YOUR NAME ON IT!**
2. Oh, you mean a journal, right? No! Your M&Ms notebook is *not* a journal! This is very important to remember. A journal is just for recording events, the things that happen to you day by day. Your M&M notebook is a place for you to practice your writing skills.
3. So what am I supposed to write about? Write about connections you make from our class to other classes. Write about what you’re learning. Write what you think about issues in the world. This is a way for us to see what you’re thinking.
4. How long does it have to be? We consider one entry to be **at least** three-quarters of a page. Whenever you write in your notebook, the idea is to write as much as you can and *keep writing* as more and more thoughts and ideas come to you. You *can’t* be “finished.” There’s *always* more to write. Set aside AT LEAST 15 minutes, and write as much as you can.
5. Do I have to do this every day? You must write at least four days a week at home plus one day in class in order to have nine entries per rotation cycle.
6. Do I have to bring my M&Ms notebook to class every day? Yes, every day. We will often ask you to write about something in class; it’s a good idea to have your M&Ms notebook with you when this opportunity comes up.
7. How are you going to grade it? The grade is based on four factors: VOLUME (how much and how often you write), VARIETY (how many different things you do), THOUGHT (how much thinking is reflected in your entries), and CONNECTIONS (relating what you learn in class to the outside world). Each of these factors combine so that your M&Ms notebook is rated excellent, good, fair, or poor, and you get a percentage grade based on the rubric. Obviously, the more you write, the more you explore your ideas, and the more thoughtful you are in your writing, the better your grade will be. If there’s very little writing/thinking/exploring in your notebook, you’ll earn a grade that is reflective of very little writing/thinking/exploring. See the assessment rubric for more details.
8. What is a reflection? Along with assigned prompts, your reflection entries (one per rotation) will allow us to see what you are thinking. This reflection could be about an “Aha!” moment in class when something that you’ve been struggling with finally clicked. It can be about how you are struggling with a certain topic from class. Reflections must be descriptive in nature. Don’t write that you are struggling—describe the struggle. We need to know. Show, don’t tell. Remember that your reflection will allow us to observe your thinking process while concentrating on your emerging ideas instead of organization, style, and grammar. Although we will mark usage issues, you will not be evaluated on those issues in your M&Ms writing. Additionally, your reflection entry should discuss how your writing/thinking/exploring should be measured based on the assessment rubric as this will be part of the grade you earn each rotation.
9. When am I supposed to hand it in? We will collect your M&Ms notebook on a rotating basis, every two weeks. You have received a schedule.

**M&Ms NOTEBOOKS – WHAT YOU CAN DO**

**Your M&Ms notebook is so much more than a journal or diary. It’s your place to “play,” to “practice,” the equivalent of an artist’s sketchbook or a musician’s jam session. It’s where you get in the habit of putting your thoughts into words and practicing the techniques that will make you better writers. Here’s a list of some *strategies*, things you can do with your M&Ms notebook:**

* How has what you are studying from the **past** influenced us or you **today**?
* What surprises you about what you’re learning? What’s interesting to you?
* **Describe** what it might have been like to be alive during our current unit.
* **List** five concepts or vocabulary words you learned today.  Write about them in your own words.
* Freewriting – write as much as you can as fast as you can. Time yourself; when you’re through, go back and read what you wrote, and see if there’s anything interesting there that you’d like to explore.
* Brainstorming – Make a list of topics, as quickly as you can, then choose one and write about it. Save the list so you can add to it later; for example, put it in the back of your notebook and try again some other time.
* Look out the window and write what you see, or listen and write what you hear. Don’t just describe it; try to *think* about whatever is out there. For example, a bridge might make you wonder about all the people crossing over it and where they’re going; a house might inspire thoughts about who lives there, or who once lived there. **Explore** how this is similar to what a historian does with old photographs, diary entries, newspaper articles, etc.
* Take an object and see how many different things you can say about it. Again, don’t just describe its physical characteristics; what can it be used for? Where did it come from? What does it represent?
* Write bits of conversation you overhear. Listen to someone talking on the phone and try to figure out what the other person is talking about. Watch people talking from a distance and imagine what they might be saying. Observe how people behave, how they speak, how they react. (Be careful with these; be **discreet**.)
* Think about an important life experience and write down every detail you can remember. Try to remember as much as you can, right down to the smallest bit. Write about it in **two different voices**—as a history textbook writer and as a novelist.
* Test your memory – see how much you can remember about a unit we’ve studied previously or the unit we are currently studying. This is a great technique for **reviewing content**.
* Put yourself into the shoes of a person from the unit you are currently learning about, and as that person, work out a problem, make a decision, or make plans. Weigh the pros and cons by writing them down.
* Cut out a picture or an article from the newspaper or a magazine, paste it in your notebook and write about it. One idea: write about this picture as a historian who is explaining it for high school students in the year 2075.
* Interview yourself; write on one side of the page, then respond on the other. Don’t ask yourself things you already know, like your age and hometown; try to find out things you *don’t* know about yourself. Use this information to write a **historical narrative** about yourself.
* **Respond** to music, a song, a TV show, a movie, or anything else you see or hear. Discuss any connections to daily life. What will this song, TV show, movie show about life now to future generations?
* For any of the above strategies, **practice** what you learn in the weekly GWAGs; for example, write an entire entry using only independent clauses joined by FANBOYS.
* Write about something you do well using the **8-sentence or 11-sentence paragraph format**.
* Find a **new strategy**; try and think of something that’s not on this list.
* **Re-read your notebook** and see if there’s anything you’d like to revisit or write more about.
* Other ideas? Jot them here: